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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and analyzes the increase in limited access programs at institutions in the Florida state higher education system and the conflict this increase poses to commitments to increased educational opportunity. An introductory section poses the problem by describing the rise of limited access programs due to increasing enrollments, decreasing funds or demands imposed on certain programs by external standards. A discussion of changes in Florida's population, enrollment and resources notes the dramatic increase in population since 1950 and recent declines in state funding. A section treats community college articulation as a pipeline to the state universities. A further discussion of the 48 percent of the undergraduate population in limited access programs points out the system's use of limited access to balance inadequate resources with maintaining academic quality. The following section discusses the impact on non-limited access programs. Issues of equity for minority groups are raised in the next section which notes lower representation of Hispanic Americans and Blacks in limited access programs. A final section concludes that though some programs have sound academic reasons for being limited access programs, limited access is widely used as a means of coping with enrollment pressures and lack of resources. (JB)

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LIMITED ACCESS:
A CONFLICT BETWEEN QUALITY AND OPPORTUNITY

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LIMITED ACCESS:
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Introduction

A basic premise of education in the United States has been that a significant portion of the population can, should, and will gain access to institutions of higher education, particularly those which are public. In the State University System of Florida (SUS), the State has sought to provide access through its 28 community colleges and nine state universities, with transfer from the former to the latter governed by what is generally considered to be the most formalized and comprehensive articulation agreement in the country.

A development over the past decade which restricts access for all students, and one which has implications for university planners, is the designation of some undergraduate programs as "limited access," whereby admission is limited by one or more of the following: a GPA requirement above the GPA required for university admission, a numerical cap on the number of students admitted to the program, or a requirement to demonstrate minimum skills through an audition or a portfolio (usually in the visual and performing arts).

The reasons for designating programs as limited access generally fall into two categories. In the first case, the number of students who have met all the requirements for admission to the university and to the program exceeds available resources, such as space, equipment, and faculty. Admissions to

these types of programs are competitive and students must meet specified additional criteria. This is generally the overriding reason for most of the limited access designations. In the second case, external standards, such as State certification requirements for teacher certification or program accreditation requirements, dictate a particular academic standard for admission which is higher than the standards required for admission to the university.

A few programs in the SUS have been operating as limited access programs on an ad hoc basis for many years, dating back prior to the 1970s. By 1990 the number of limited access programs had risen dramatically due to a combination of overall increasing enrollments and decreasing funding per student FTE. The combination of enrollment demands and fiscal limitations also served to increase the selectivity of universities at this time, and requiring a higher GPA for certain programs reflected both the increased demand on resources and the greater selectivity of students. The fact is that, now,many students are turned away from Florida's universities, and those who do get in may very well not be admitted to their major of first choice.

Florida's Population, Enrollment, and Resources

In 1950, Florida's population was under 3 million; by 1990 the population had increased to almost 13 million, making Florida the fourth most populous state in the U.S. The soaring population in the State is reflected in the SUS enrollments. In the past decade the headcount has grown from under 130,000 in

1980 to 175,960 in 1990. The student FTE now stands at almost 105,000.

The student demand has been even greater than one might surmise from the enrollment growth. In 1989-90 only about 17% of the previous year's high school graduates were able to enroll in the SUS as First Time in College students. It is expected that, by the year 2000, the SUS will have approximately 70,000 more undergraduates than it does now, if students continue to be accepted at the current rate.

At the same time that enrollment pressures have increased, state funding per student has decreased. The Florida lottery, which was sold to the public as a means of enhancing education, has instead simply replaced general revenue funds. In fact, funding per student FTE, combining both general revenue and lottery dollars, has decreased from $7,156 in 1989-90 to $5,877 in 1991-92. In the past year, due to state revenue shortfalls, the SUS budget has been cut by over $150,000,000.

It is the combination of these pressures which have brought the issue of limited access programs to the fore in the SUS.

Community College Articulation

By state law, the Associate of Arts (AA) graduates of Florida's 28 community colleges are guaranteed access to the upper division at the nine state universities. As a result of the articulation agreement, 38% of SUS upper division students are community college AA transfers. The formal articulation agreement provides that community college AA transfer students shall have the same

opportunity to enroll in university limited access programs as native university students.

Limited Access Programs

Only 16% of the SUS headcount is at the graduate level. Therefore, limited access has a profound effect on the SUS as a whole, and the effect is magnified at some of the universities where many of the programs are limited access. Fully 48% of the undergraduate student population is in the limited access programs. This illustrates the growing reach of the phenomenon of limited access into the undergraduate programs. A total of 239 degree programs in the SUS, representing 38% of all undergraduate degree programs, have been declared limited access. Many of these programs are in the disciplines of Business, Education, Engineering, Allied Health, Nursing, and Visual and Performing Arts.

In view of the fact that several of the programs are in fields of high market demand, limiting access serves to limit the degree production in areas of high societal need. These programs of high market demand are also the programs which tend to be more costly, requiring special equipment and, in some cases, specified student:faculty ratios for licensure and accreditation requirements. They are, therefore, prime targets to be designated limited access.

The Core of the Problem

Limiting access to certain programs has become a means by

which the universities in the SUS attempt to balance inadequate resources with maintaining academic quality. The issues of access versus quality come to a head in the issue of limited access. Clearly, in many fields, quality cannot be maintained when enrollment soars while resources remain level or decrease. The resources take the form of classroom and laboratory space, work stations, library materials, and most importantly, faculty. These circumstances lead to increasing selectivity in regard to students and the loss of potential graduates from high market demand fields.

A Refugee Class of Students

An unfortunate outcome of limited access is that it appears to be creating a migratory class of students who must settle on majors of second choice. Limited access, therefore, affects the remaining programs which are not limited access. One phenomenon observed in the SUS is a domino effect, where exclusion from one discipline creates unprecedented enrollment pressures on other disciplines. For example, declaring high-demand Business degree programs limited access caused many of the would-be business majors to seek Economics as a major. This, in turn, led to the Economics program being declared limited access, and, consequently, many students looked to other disciplines for majors. One discipline selected by students when other avenues closed was Psychology. At one university, the enrollment of majors in Psychology increased from 350 in 1986 to over 900 in 1990. The number of filled faculty positions in psychology

during this period of time decreased. As a result, the faculty and physical resources were overwhelmed by the surge of majors, and now the Psychology program is seeking limited access status.

The humanities, which have suffered declining enrollments for many years, are enjoying large increases in student enrollment partly due to limited access in other disciplines. The numbers of English majors, for example, has increased significantly systemwide. Unfortunately, this popularity has not brought corresponding faculty resources to cope with the pressures, and it illustrates what amounts to a bimodal distribution of interest: those who really want to study Shakespeare, and those who would rather be in the business school.

Issues of Equity

A major issue of equity relating to limited access is whether minority groups are disproportionately disadvantaged by the limited access to various programs. The representation of African-Americans and Hispanics is less in limited access programs than in upper division non-limited access programs, while the representation of Whites is greater in limited access programs than in non-limited access programs. Among limited access programs, only 4% of the students enrolled are African American, and only 6% of the students are Hispanic. In non-limited access programs, 9% of the students are African American, and 16% of the students are Hispanic.

Conclusion

The state universities in Florida have attempted to grapple with preserving academic quality in the face of burgeoning enrollments and budget cuts by declaring certain programs limited access. In order to mitigate the negative effects of such an action the SUS requires BOR approval prior to designating a program as limited access. The universities must submit proposals which specify the criteria which will be used for selecting students, the justification for limiting access, and a detailed assessment of the impact on minority students and women. Special provisions for the recruitment and retention of minorities and women are often required.

The trends resulting from limited access suggest that while a few disciplines may have sound academic reasons for being limited access regardless of economic climate, limited access as a widely used means of coping with enrollment pressures and lack of resources is fraught with complications. The inadequate resources available to the universities in the face of burgeoning enrollments in the university system, creates the dilemma of balancing access to higher education, promoting cultural diversity, and meeting societal needs, with the reality of attempting to maintain quality with limited resources. The phenomenon of limited access, already well-developed, in Florida, should be the object of serious consideration for university planners in other states.